



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Indian myths and modernity: Their application in Tagore, Anand, and Narayan's selected short stories

Priyanka Patel^{1*}, Bhaskar Pandya²

Abstract

Indian myths have long served as a source of inspiration for Indian literature because they are ingrained in epics, folklore, and religious traditions. These myths are not just preserved in contemporary Indian short fiction; they are also reimagined, challenged, and incorporated into the present. This essay explores how myth and modernity interact in nine chosen short stories by R.K. Narayan (God and the Cobbler, The Cursed Land, Under the Banyan Tree), Mulk Raj Anand (The Legend of the Sacred Thread, The Idol Breaker, The Parrot in the Cage), and Rabindranath Tagore (The Hungry Stones, The Devotee, The Victory). The study looks into the ways in which each author uses myth to examine spirituality, social change, and cultural continuity.

Tagore frequently uses mystical and legendary aspects to delve into philosophical issues and human psychology. The Victory uses mythological justice to address moral triumph; The Devotee explores the fine line between religion and fanaticism; and The Hungry Stones uses Persian-Mughal legend to explore obsession and memory. Anand takes a critical and reformist stance; The Parrot in the Cage criticizes gender inequality ingrained in tradition, The Idol Breaker questions idol worship, and The Legend of the Sacred Thread reveals caste-based customs. The Cursed Land examines rural superstition, God and the Cobbler depicts heavenly intervention in a humble man's life, and Under the Banyan Tree honours storytelling as a divine gift. Narayan's writing style skillfully incorporates myth into ordinary life.

This study illustrates how Tagore employs myth for introspection, Anand uses it for societal critique, and Narayan uses it for cultural affirmation through qualitative textual analysis bolstered by thematic mapping. The results show that myth is still a dynamic, flexible framework for addressing the existential, cultural, and moral issues facing contemporary India rather than being an archaic narrative form.

Keywords: Indian myths, Modernity, Cultural reinterpretation, Spirituality, Social reform, Narrative tradition.

关键词: 印度神话、现代性、文化重新诠释、灵性、社会改革、叙事传统。

Introduction

The huge reservoir of myths, epics, and folklore that serve as the foundation of the subcontinent's cultural awareness has long been a source of inspiration for Indian literature. In addition to influencing religious activities, the ancient

stories of the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Puranas, and other local legends have also functioned as moral codes, identity markers, and archives of communal memory. These myths have been altered to reflect changing socio-political realities in the modern era rather than being abandoned or blindly embraced.

Moreover, in the Indian context, modernity involves a complicated interaction between post-independence socioeconomic change, nationalist ambitions, and colonial legacy. Rationalism, democratic principles, individual liberty, and social reform movements, many of which challenge the dogmas of conventional wisdom, are its defining characteristics (Anand, M. R., 1942). In this setting, the literary use of myth becomes a dynamic process that frequently generates new interpretations while also occasionally questioning and conserving cultural identity.

In order to address the contemporary situation, this study examines the ways in which three trailblazing writers, Rabindranath Tagore, Mulk Raj Anand, and R.K. Narayan, use Indian myths in their short stories. Nobel laureate and

¹Research scholar and Assistant Professor, Charotar University of Science and Technology, Changa, Gujarat, India.

²Dean, Faculty of Humanities, Research Supervisor, Charotar University of Science and Technology (CHARUSAT), Changa, Gujarat, India.

***Corresponding Author:** Priyanka Patel, Research scholar and Assistant Professor, Charotar University of Science and Technology, Changa, Gujarat, India, E-Mail: priyapatel2512@gmail.com

How to cite this article: Patel, P., Pandya, B. (2025). Indian myths and modernity: Their application in Tagore, Anand, and Narayan's selected short stories. *The Scientific Temper*, 16(8):4668-4672.

Doi: 10.58414/SCIENTIFICTEMPER.2025.16.8.10

Source of support: Nil

Conflict of interest: None.

poet-philosopher Tagore frequently retells myths to delve into existential and spiritual issues. Anand, a fervent social realist, challenges repressive gender, caste, and superstitious systems through myth. Prominent for inventing the made-up town of Malgudi, Narayan skillfully incorporates myth into daily life while striking a balance between irony and comedy and profound cultural understanding.

This study looks at nine chosen stories, three from each author, to explore how myth can be used as a narrative device to resolve conflicts between tradition and change (Anand, M. R., 1994). The goal is to comprehend the various narrative techniques that these writers employ to reconcile the needs of the contemporary world with the mythological past, demonstrating the myth's ongoing adaptability and significance in Indian literature.

Literature Review

Both Indian and foreign academics have studied the connection between myth and literature in detail. Frye (1957) asserts that myth serves as the "structural skeleton" of literature, supporting archetypal patterns and symbolic frameworks that are prevalent in literature from all cultures and historical periods. Eliade (1963) highlights myth's sacred function in giving the mundane parts of life a greater significance, whereas Campbell (1949) sees myth as a metaphor for the human experience that can be adapted to many historical and cultural situations. Myths in India are dynamic, living traditions that influence societal structures, moral standards, and creative expression rather than being static artifacts (Mukherjee, 1971).

Myths frequently have two functions in contemporary Indian English literature: they preserve cultural history while simultaneously challenging established hierarchies. Especially in the postcolonial era, King (2001) notes that modern Indian writers regularly reinterpret myths to speak to socio-political reality. According to Nandy (2004), myths can be resurrected and reinterpreted as a counter-discourse to colonial narratives, providing a way for indigenous people to reclaim their identity as well as a kind of cultural resistance.

The use of myth by Rabindranath Tagore reveals a profound interest in philosophy and psychology. Das (1996) points out that in order to confront moral quandaries; Tagore frequently combines human psychology, religious metaphor, and folklore. For instance, *The Victory* cites heavenly justice as a metaphor for moral triumph, *The Devotee* examines the thin boundary between faith and fanaticism, and *The Hungry Stones* uses Persian-Mughal folklore to examine themes of obsession and historical memory. These pieces exhibit Tagore's skill in fusing modern sensibilities with mythological motifs.

Mulk Raj Anand, on the other hand, takes a reformist and frequently subversive stance when dealing with myth. According to Cowasjee (1977), Anand deprives myths of

their divine halo in order to expose their involvement in societal oppression. He criticizes Brahminical ceremonies as caste-exclusionary practices in *The Legend of the Sacred Thread*. *The Parrot in the Cage* employs metaphor to draw attention to the religious and cultural restrictions placed on women, while *The Idol Breaker* questions the justification for idolatry. Anand uses these stories to turn myth into a tool for socio-political criticism.

In his fictitious village of Malgudi, R.K. Narayan "domesticates" myth by incorporating supernatural and divine elements into the daily routine, as noted by Walsh (1982). In *God and the Cobbler*, the fate of a lowly craftsman is shaped by faith in supernatural intervention. *The Cursed Land* illustrates how rural superstition is accepted by society, but *Under the Banyan Tree* depicts creativity as a sacred act by connecting storytelling to the graces of Goddess Saraswati. By normalizing myth in contemporary cultural life, Narayan shows how myth can retain its meaning.

In contemporary Indian literature, myth serves as a "negotiating space" where the sacred and the secular meet, according to Dharwadker (2018). This flexibility enables writers to continue with cultural legacy while addressing modern concerns, including spiritual, social, and political ones. Tagore, Anand, and Narayan demonstrate three different approaches to this negotiation: cultural affirmation, social transformation, and philosophical investigation.

Materials and Methodology

Selection of Primary Texts

Nine short stories three from each of the three chosen authors, Rabindranath Tagore, Mulk Raj Anand, and R.K. Narayan are the subject of this study. In addition to their potential to demonstrate the authors' various ways to incorporating myth into contemporary circumstances, the stories were selected for their overt use of Indian mythology, religious themes, and traditional beliefs.

1. Rabindranath Tagore: *The Hungry Stones*, *The Devotee*, *The Victory* (Byapika)
2. Mulk Raj Anand: *The Legend of the Sacred Thread*, *The Idol Breaker*, *The Parrot in the Cage*
3. R.K. Narayan: *God and the Cobbler*, *The Cursed Land*, *Under the Banyan Tree*.

These stories are perfect for comparative examination since they contain a variety of mythic references, such as Hindu devotional archetypes, Persian-Mughal narratives, and symbolic reinterpretations of religious practices.

Research Approach

A qualitative textual analysis method is used in this investigation. The goal is to analyze the narrative functions, thematic roles, and symbolic changes of myth within each story rather than quantifying the number of instances of myth (Anand, M. R., 2008). The method, which emphasizes

attentive reading to reveal both overt and covert encounters with myth, is based on literary hermeneutics.

Comparative Framework

Three major thematic lenses serve as the framework for organizing the analysis:

- Engaging Philosophically and Spiritually: Using myths to examine existential and ethical issues (most notably in Tagore).
- The use of myths to question gender inequity, caste, and superstition is a socio-political critique that is prevalent in Anand.
- Cultural integration is the normalization of myths in contemporary contexts as a part of daily life (a trait of Narayan).

Using these perspectives, the study aims to draw attention to the similarities and differences in the writers' treatment of myth.

Data Collection and Analysis

The nine short stories in their published English forms make up the primary data. Scholarly publications, critical analyses, and theoretical works on myth and modernity are examples of secondary data (Campbell, 1949; Frye, 1957; Eliade, 1963; King, 2001; Mukherjee, 1971). To find mythological motifs, storytelling techniques, and authorial intent, the stories are analyzed using thematic coding.

Experiments or Statistical Analysis

This study employs a structured comparative analysis to find recurrent patterns in the authors' usage of myth, despite its essentially qualitative nature. The research focuses on mapping thematic variances and consistencies throughout the nine chosen stories rather than performing numerical assessments.

Each story was thematically coded in the first step. Texts with religious allegories, folklore motifs, mythological allusions, or deeply ingrained cultural ideas were identified and grouped based on their main narrative purpose. As a result, three major thematic patterns could be found:

Philosophical and Spiritual Engagement: Myths frequently function as a means of examining spiritual truth and internal moral conflicts in Tagore's stories. For example, *The Victory* looks to divine justice as a way to resolve moral quandaries, *The Devotee* explores the boundaries of religious devotion, and *The Hungry Stones* employs the legend of a haunted mansion to examine the frailty of human perception.

Socio-Political Critique: Social inequities are constantly revealed by Anand through myth (Chakrabarty, D., 2011). *The Idol Breaker* depicts a rationalist opposing orthodox worship, *The Legend of the Sacred Thread* parodies caste-based customs, and *The Parrot in the Cage* turns a traditional legend metaphor into a feminist critique of gender inequality.

Cultural Integration and Normalization: Without necessarily questioning or exalting legendary belief, Narayan's stories incorporate it into daily life. Under the *Banyan Tree* honours the divine beginnings of storytelling; *The Cursed Land* views rural superstition as a recognized social fact; and *God and the Cobbler* shows how divine intervention organically arises in the lives of a humble individual.

Cross-comparison was used in the second step to evaluate similarities and differences. It was noted that although all three writers have a profound regard for the myth's cultural legacy, their approaches to it differ significantly: Tagore's is introspective, Anand's is reformer, and Narayan's is culturally conserving. Despite being qualitative, this comparison method enables a methodical comprehension of how myth functions as a versatile narrative device in contemporary Indian short fiction.

Results and Discussion

Rabindranath Tagore, Mulk Raj Anand, and R.K. Narayan all draw from the same source of Indian myth, but their goals, focuses, and storytelling styles are very different, as the comparative reading of the nine chosen short stories shows. These variations show how myth is not a fixed cultural relic but rather serves a variety of literary purposes, including philosophical, reformist, and cultural ones.

Rabindranath Tagore: Myth as a Source of Philosophical and Spiritual Study

Tagore's poetic connection with the invisible forces influencing human existence is a defining characteristic of his treatment of myth. Instead of recounting myths in their authentic form, he frequently transforms them into philosophical parables. The fabled history of a haunted Mughal mansion in *The Hungry Stones* is rooted in Indo-Islamic and Persian mythology (Narang, M. B., 2025). The palace turns into a transitional area a "threshold" between the paranormal and the historical. Echoing Indian ghostlore in which spirits are confined to their earthly haunts, the protagonist's growing captivity in images of a former court reflects the mythic concept of being consumed by an endless past. Instead of using this mythic framework for horror, Tagore utilizes it to reflect on the idea of *maya*, or the human propensity for delusion, which is fundamental to Vedantic philosophy.

The *Hungry Stones*'s legendary tale of a haunted Mughal house has its origins in Persian and Indo-Islamic folklore. As a "threshold" between the historical and the paranormal, the palace becomes a place of transformation. In imagery of a previous court, the protagonist's increasing confinement echoes Indian ghostlore, which confines ghosts to their earthly haunts. This represents the legendary idea of being swallowed by an eternal past. This legendary framework is not used for horror; rather, it is used by Tagore to contemplate the core Vedantic concept of *maya*, or the

human tendency toward delusion. The moral certainties that are inherent in mythological epics, where virtue finally triumphs over vice, are invoked by Tagore in *The Victory* (Byapika). His narrative, however, gives this justice a nuanced quality: victory is not only the product of divine reward but also of moral steadfastness in a morally complicated world. The narrative delicately connects the ancient ideal of dharma with its contemporary ethical meaning.

By enabling ancient motifs to shed light on modern issues, Tagore shows via these works that myth may be a platform for existential and moral reflection.

Mulk Raj Anand: Using Myth as a Social Reform Instrument

In his adversarial approach to myth, Anand uses it as a mirror to highlight the inconsistencies and inequities present in Indian society. Instead of being nostalgic, his reworking of mythic motifs is corrective.

Traditionally a sign of Brahminical privilege, the sacred thread (yajnopavita) is transformed into a powerful emblem of structural inequality in *The Legend of the Sacred Thread*. Anand undermines the moral authority of caste-bound custom by portraying the rite as degrading for those compelled to perform it under oppressive systems. By doing this, he transforms a sign that is purportedly heavenly into one that represents social divide.

Perhaps the most direct challenge to religious orthodoxy is presented in *The Idol Breaker*. The protagonist's destruction of an idol is a symbolic rejection of orthodoxy rather than just a real-life occurrence (Narayan, S., 2023). Anand takes back the idol (murti), which is a sanctified representation of the divine in Hindu mythology, to make the case for human action over ritual reliance. The story parallels the beliefs of reformers like Periyar and Ambedkar and captures the intellectual and reformist attitude of the early 20th century.

A well-known folk image is transformed into a feminist metaphor in *The Parrot in the Cage*. Caged birds are frequently used in Indian oral traditions to represent a loss of freedom or a yearning for one's own land. Anand repurposes this theme to highlight the predicament of women who are constrained by religious doctrine, patriarchal standards, and financial reliance. Thus, the legendary metaphor turns into an appeal for tradition to be liberated rather than preserved.

According to Anand, myth is a contested narrative space where social justice can be affirmed in opposition to repressive traditions rather than an unchangeable truth.

R.K. Narayan: Myth as a Cultural Legacy in Daily Life

Narayan's use of myth is neither as extreme politically as Anand's, nor is it as philosophically deep as Tagore's. Rather, by depicting myth as an integral aspect of Malgudi's daily life, he normalizes it. His method reflects how many

Indians view myth as a real, tangible presence rather than an abstract story.

In *God and the Cobbler*, the protagonist's life is molded by unshakable faith, culminating in a heavenly gesture of kindness. In the cobbler's everyday hardships, the divine is a close presence rather than a far-off cosmic figure. In small-town India, where gods are more like family acquaintances than distant theological ideas, Narayan encapsulates the religious spirit that permeates most of the country.

The Cursed Land illustrates how place serves a legendary purpose. In Indian village life, some groves, wells, or territories are associated with supernatural forces: curses or blessings that have been passed down through the ages (Singh, V., 2017). Without resorting to sensationalism, Narayan explains this idea and shows how myths like this serve as a unifying force that shapes behavior and shared identity.

In *Under the Banyan Tree*, Goddess Saraswati connects storytelling to divine inspiration. It is believed that a sacred wellspring of artistic inspiration is responsible for Nambi's eventual loss of his storytelling talent, which is ascribed to heavenly withdrawal rather than human weakness. In Hindu and Jain cosmology, the banyan tree itself is a recurrent symbol that serves as a center of tradition and wisdom.

Readers are able to view myth as an everyday reality rather than a relic to be destroyed or a sacred thing to be idealized because of Narayan's masterful presentation of myth as a part of an intact cultural continuum.

Comparative Synthesis

A range of approaches to myth is revealed by comparing the three authors:

Tagore uses myth to reflect on eternal existential and moral issues, elevating it into a philosophical domain. His tales adapt the meaning of myth to contemporary reflection while maintaining its dignity.

In order to undermine repressive structures and make the case for egalitarian, rationalist reform, Anand reframes myth as a contested location of power. His interaction with myth is frequently iconoclastic and transformative.

Narayan presents myth with loving irony and incorporates it into everyday rhythms, treating it as a natural element of the cultural landscape.

This range demonstrates the versatility of myth in contemporary Indian literature. Myth turns into a spiritual mirror in Tagore's hands, a weapon of revolution in Anand's, and a cultural hearth in Narayan's. When taken as a whole, they show that modernism in India is about reinterpreting the past to suit the demands of the present rather than abolishing it.

Conclusion

In particular, the short stories by Rabindranath Tagore, Mulk Raj Anand, and R.K. Narayan show how Indian mythology

continues to play an important and changing role in contemporary Indian literature. These writers reinterpret myth in remarkably different ways, despite having the same cultural past, demonstrating the versatility of myth as a literary device.

Rabindranath Tagore converts old themes into allegories that explore the essence of faith, perception, and moral integrity through the use of myth as a philosophical and spiritual lens. In stories like *The Hungry Stones* and *The Devotee*, he maintains the honor of myth while transforming it to speak to the moral and psychological issues of a modernizing society.

Mulk Raj Anand, on the other hand, uses myth as a tool for societal criticism. He undermines the traditional authority of symbols such as the idol or the holy thread and reassigns them revolutionary meanings that aim to abolish blind faith, gender injustice, and caste inequalities. The presumed sanctity of myth is stripped away by his reinterpretations, especially in *The Legend of the Sacred Thread* and *The Idol Breaker*, which expose myth's capacity to uphold injustice.

In his portrayal of myth as an organic, unforced component of cultural identity, R.K. Narayan incorporates it into the beats of daily life. In tales like *God and the Cobbler* and *Under the Banyan Tree*, supernatural beliefs and heavenly presences dwell in harmony with everyday life, illustrating how societies embody myth rather than just recall it.

This comparative study demonstrates that Indian literature's modernity actively engages with the past, sometimes in a respectful, sometimes critical, and occasionally humorous manner, rather than rejecting it. Myth's adaptability comes from its ability to serve as a hearth for cultural continuity, a weapon for reform, and a mirror for reflection. Myth turns into a dynamic conversation between tradition and change in the writings of Tagore, Anand, and Narayan, demonstrating that the moral, cultural, and creative landscapes of the present can still be influenced by the stories of the past.

Acknowledgment

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to Charotar University of Science and Technology for providing academic resources, scholarly guidance, and encouragement during the course of this research. Special thanks are extended to colleagues, peers, and the academic community whose valuable insights helped shape the thematic analysis and comparative framework of this study.

References

- Anand, M. R. (1942). *The parrot in the cage and other stories*. Kutub Publishers.
- Anand, M. R. (1994). *Selected short stories*. Arnold Publishers.
- Anand, M. R. (2008). *Two leaves and a bud and other stories*. Orient Paperbacks.
- Campbell, J. (2008). *The hero with a thousand faces* (3rd ed.). New World Library.
- Chakrabarty, D. (2011). The muddle of modernity. *The American Historical Review*, 116(3), 663-675.
- Eliade, M. (1963). *Myth and reality*. Harper & Row.
- Frye, N. (2000). *Anatomy of criticism: Four essays*. Princeton University Press.
- King, B. (2004). *Modern Indian literature in English*. Oxford University Press.
- Mukherjee, M. (1971). *The twice born fiction: Themes and techniques of the Indian novel in English*. Heinemann.
- Narang, M. B. (2025). Myth and Modernity: Reimagining Lord Shiva in Contemporary Indian English Fiction. *Vidhyayana-An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal-ISSN 2454-8596*, 10(si3).
- Narayan, R. K. (1985). *Under the banyan tree and other stories*. Viking.
- Narayan, R. K. (2006). *Malgudi days*. Indian Thought Publications.
- Narayan, S. (2023). Indian Short Stories and Their Development. *Shodhshauryam International Scientific Refereed Research*, 6(3), 38-46.
- Singh, V. (2017). Modern Retelling of Indian Myths: A Study of Rehashing Mythology through Popular Fictions. *IMPACT: International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Literature*, 5(10).
- Tagore, R. (1994). *The hungry stones and other stories*. Rupa & Co.
- Tagore, R. (2005). *Selected short stories*. Macmillan India.